



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Slovak Republic

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, anti-Semitism persisted among some elements of the population.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 18,859 square miles, and its population is 5,396,193. According to the 2001 census, the number of persons who claimed a religious affiliation increased from 72.8 percent in 1991 to 84.1 percent in 2001. This increase may be in part due to greater willingness among persons to state their affiliation, unlike in 1991 immediately after the fall of communism. According to the census, there were 3,708,120 Roman Catholics (68.9 percent of the population), 372,858 Augsburg Lutherans (6.9 percent), 219,831 Byzantine Catholics (4.1 percent), 109,735 members of the Reformed Christian Church (2 percent), 50,363 Orthodox Christians (1 percent), and 20,630 members of Jehovah's Witnesses. There were also approximately 3,562 Baptists, 3,217 Brethren Church members, 3,429 Seventh-day Adventists, 3,905 Apostolic Church members, 7,347 Evangelical Methodist Church members, 3,000 Jews, 1,733 Old Catholic Church members, 6,519 Christian Corps in Slovakia members, and 1,696 Czechoslovak Husite Church members. According to the 2001 census, 12 percent of the population claimed no religious affiliation, and 2 percent were undecided. There were also some Muslims living in the country, primarily immigrants from Middle Eastern countries, international students, or Albanian immigrants. Estimates of the Muslim population vary from 300 to 3,000.

There are three categories of nonregistered religions that comprise approximately 30 groups: nontraditional religions (Ananda Marga, Hare Krishna, Yoga in Daily Life, Osho, Sahadza Yoga, Shambaola Slovakia, Sri Chinmoy, Zazen International Slovakia, Zen Centermyo Sahn Sah, Rosicrucians, and Raelians); the religious societies termed "syncretic" by the Government (Unification Church, the Church of Scientology, Movement of the Holy Grail, and the Baha'i Faith); and the Christian religious societies (The Church of Christ, Manna Church, International Association of Full Evangelium Traders, Christian Communities, Church of the Nazarenes, New Revelation, Word of International Life, Society of the Friends of Jesus Christ, Sword of Spirit, Disciples of Jesus Christ, Universal Life, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Free Peoples' Mission, Presbyterian Church Emmanuel, and Brothers in Christ (Christadelphians)).

The number of immigrants is statistically insignificant. There are very small numbers of refugees and migrants who practice different faiths from the majority of native-born citizens. Missionaries do not register with the Government, and no official statistics exist, although according to government information, there are missionaries from the Roman Catholic, Augsburg Lutheran, and Methodist faiths, as well as a Jewish emissary, active in the country. Among the nonregistered churches, there are a significant number of Mormon missionaries.

There is some correlation between religious differences and ethnic or political differences. The Christian Democratic Party (KDH), which has ties to the Catholic faith, is the only political party with an explicitly religious agenda. The Slovak Democratic Christian Union (SDKU) is a Christian Democratic party similar to those found in many western European countries, and the Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK) also has a Christian wing.

Followers of the Orthodox Church live predominantly in the eastern part of the country. The Ruthenian minority are typically adherents to the Orthodox faith. The Reformed Christian Church exists primarily in the south, near the border with Hungary, where many ethnic Hungarians live. Other religious groups tend to be spread evenly across the country.

According to polling data, the number of religious practitioners continues to increase following the fall of Communism, and approximately 54 percent of Catholics and 22 percent of Lutherans actively participate in formal religious services.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

The Constitution provides for the right to practice the religion of one's choice, the right to change religion or faith, and the right to refrain from any religious affiliation. The Government observes and enforces these provisions in practice.

The law provides for freedom of religion and defines the status of religious groups, including those groups not registered with the Government. It does not prohibit the existence of nontraditional religions. It allows the Government to enter agreements with religious communities. The law is applied and enforced in a nondiscriminatory fashion.

Governmental entities at all levels, including the courts, interpret the law in a way that protects religious freedom.

No official state religion exists; however, because of the numbers of adherents, Catholicism is considered the dominant religion. The Catholic Church receives significantly larger government subsidies because of the higher percentage of Catholics in the country. In 2001, the Government signed an international treaty with the Vatican, which provides the legal framework for relations between the country's Catholic Church, the Government, and the Vatican. Four corollaries to the framework treaty have been proposed. In 2002, the Government signed an agreement with 11 other registered religious groups in an attempt to counterbalance the Vatican agreement and provide equal status to the remaining registered religions. This agreement is subordinate to national law and subject to amendment by statute; the Vatican treaty, as an international agreement, can be amended only through international legal mechanisms.

In 2002, the Government approved one of the corollaries regarding military service for priests. In 2003, the President signed a second corollary regarding religious education, which was approved by Parliament in January 2004. An identical agreement was signed with 11 other registered religions. This treaty mandates that all public elementary schools require children to take either a religion class or an ethics class, depending on their (or their parents') preference. This was previously required only for students in fifth through ninth grade. Private schools affiliated with a particular religion do not need to provide classes in other religions. These courses are often taught by religious leaders, and the religious groups are responsible for providing instructors, although their salaries are paid from the government budget. There is a lack of qualified teachers for certain religions. Some representatives of religious groups complain that the status of religious lecturers is not equal to that of regular teachers. Religious lecturers are usually hired on contract and are not paid during the 2-month summer vacation. There was some concern about possible ostracism of student members of smaller religions, who might be one of a small group requesting the class, especially in smaller municipalities. Despite these resource concerns, smaller churches reiterated that they were still generally pleased with the system.

The remaining two corollaries to the Vatican treaty, including a proposal to allow Catholic employees to refuse to perform official functions on religious grounds, remained under consideration at the end of the period covered by this report.

Registration of religious groups is not required, but under existing law, only registered religious groups have the explicit right to conduct public worship services and other activities, although no specific religions or practices are banned or discouraged by the authorities in practice. Those that register receive government benefits, including subsidies for clergymen, office expenses, the right to visit and proselytize in prisons and hospitals, and access to public television broadcasting. Government funding also is provided to religious schools and to teachers who lecture on religion in state schools. The Government occasionally subsidizes one-time projects and significant religious activities, and registered religious groups are partly exempt from paying taxes and import custom fees. A religion may elect not to accept the subsidies.

There are currently 16 registered religious groups in the country; the last group to successfully register was the Apostolic Church in 2001.

To register a new religion, a group must submit a list of 20,000 permanent residents who adhere to that religion. Fourteen of the religions already established before the law passed in 1991 were exempt from this membership requirement. Although the Nazarene and the Muslim communities existed in the country prior to 1991, they were never properly registered and, therefore, were not given registered status under the 1991 law. Two additional religious groups have been allowed to register since 1991: the Jehovah's Witnesses and the New Apostolic Church. Leaders of a number of minority religious communities, in particular Muslims, smaller Protestant churches, the Hare Krishna community, and the Church of Scientology, have in previous years complained that they did not meet the membership requirement, which effectively barred them from obtaining registered status. Nonregistered religious groups may not build public places of worship or conduct legally valid religious ceremonies such as weddings. In 2000, the Muslim community in Bratislava purchased a plot of land with the hope of building an Islamic center. While they previously speculated that municipal officials were denying them permission for the construction, it appears that financial problems, zoning questions, and a lack of identifiable leadership in the Muslim community could have also affected the

construction delay. Several of Bratislava's Muslims also criticized the registration law, noting that the community in the Czech Republic was able to submit an application for first-tier registration under Czech law (300 or more citizen member signatures).

Because the law on registration of religious groups does not provide for registration of nontheistic groups, the Department of Church Affairs suggested that an atheist group that had made inquiries into obtaining registration might find funding from the Department of Minority Culture.

There are no specific licensing or registration requirements for foreign missionaries or religious organizations. The law allows all religious groups to send out their representatives as well as to receive foreign missionaries without limitation. Missionaries neither need special permission to stay in the country, nor are their activities regulated in any way.

Joint education projects on Jewish history and culture for elementary and high school teachers have been successful and well received. The Government continues to seek full membership in the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research. In 2004, teachers continued to visit U.S. universities to participate in summer training programs; 25 Slovak teachers visited the concentration camp in Dachau, and 20 teachers traveled to Terezin for training on Holocaust education in the Czech Republic. To assist teachers with instruction about the Holocaust, the Ministry of Education published a textbook, "Why We Learn about the Holocaust," during the reporting period and distributed it to four teacher-training centers. In 2003, a Holocaust Documentation Center was established as a joint project of the Bratislava Jewish community and the Milan Simecka Foundation; and after May 2005, the Union of Jewish Communities and the Simecka Foundation took over its administration. It has released several publications dealing with the Holocaust in the country, Jewish wartime history, and memoirs of Jewish personalities.

There are several religious holidays that are celebrated as national holidays, including Epiphany, the Day of the Virgin Mary of the Seven Sorrows, All Saints Day, St. Stephen's Day, Christmas, and Easter. A treaty with the Vatican prohibits the removal or alteration of existing religious holidays considered as state holidays.

The Department of Church Affairs at the Ministry of Culture oversees relations between religious groups and the State and manages the distribution of state subsidies to religious groups and associations. However, the Ministry cannot intervene in the internal affairs of religious groups and does not direct their activities. The Ministry administers a cultural state fund, Pro Slovakia, which among other things allocates money to cover the repair of religious monuments. Public cooperation was integral to the reconstruction of a Jewish cemetery in Bratislava, which involved rerouting tram tracks. The site, including the grave of 19th-century Jewish scholar Chatam Sofer, was restored in 2001 with substantial financing from the Bratislava Local Council as well as from a foreign organization, the International Committee for the Preservation of the Gravesites of Geonai in Pressburg.

Under the auspices of the government Office for National Minorities and Human Rights, an official agreement was signed between the Government and the Greek Catholic and Orthodox Churches to conclude property disputes stemming from the Communist and post-World War II eras. Since 1989, the Government has promoted interfaith dialogue and understanding by supporting events organized by various religious groups. The state-supported Ecumenical Council of Churches promotes communication within the religious community. Most Christian churches have the status of members or observers in the Council. The Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities in the Slovak Republic (UZZNO) was invited and participates in its activities.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion. Although government support is provided in a nondiscriminatory manner to registered religious groups that seek it, the requirement that a registered organization have 20,000 members disadvantages smaller faiths. Some property restitution cases remain unresolved.

The Institute of State-Church Relations monitors and researches religious "cults" and "sects"; however, it is difficult to identify these groups because they largely register as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) rather than as religious groups. The Institute conducts seminars, issues publications, and provides information to the media regarding its findings. The Institute's budget comes mainly from the Ministry of Culture's general fund, although it has received some grants for its projects from other sources. Other organizations not funded by the Government, such as the Center for the Study of Sects, engage in similar work.

Law 282/93 on Restitution of Communal Property enabled all religious groups to apply for the return of their property confiscated by the communist government. The deadline for these claims was December 31, 1994. The property was returned in its existing condition, and the Government did not provide any compensation for the damage done to it during the previous regime. The property was returned by the Government, municipalities, state legal entities, and under certain conditions by private persons. In some cases, the property was returned legally by the Government, but it was not vacated by the former tenant, often a school or hospital with nowhere else to go.

There also have been problems with the return of property that had been undeveloped at the time of seizure but upon which there since has been construction. Churches, synagogues, and cemeteries have been returned, albeit mostly in poor condition. Religious groups often lack the funds to restore these properties to a usable condition. The main obstacles to the resolution of outstanding restitution claims are the Government's lack of financial resources, due to its austerity program, and bureaucratic resistance on the part of those entities required to vacate restitutable properties. The Reformed Christian Church has been vocal

regarding its unfulfilled restitution claims. According to their representatives, the new restitution law that went into effect in May 2005 addresses some complex property claims, but it does not resolve the cases of approximately 70 church premises (church schools, teachers' facilities, etc.) that were owned by individual parishes and nationalized by the Communist government after 1948. Reformed Christian Church officials also complained that the Government does not allow church organizations to draw from European Union structural funds for social purposes. The Church exists primarily in poorer areas of the country where there is little money for restoration; it is seeking funds from abroad.

The Orthodox Church reported that all of its claims for restitution have been settled, while the Catholic Church reported that more than half of the property that it had claimed had been returned. In another 12 percent of cases, the property had been returned legally to the Church but typically was occupied by other tenants and would require court action to be returned to church hands. The Church had not received any compensation for the remaining 40 percent of claims since these properties were undeveloped at the time of nationalization but were developed later. The Church also is not eligible to reacquire lands that originally were registered to church foundations that no longer exist or no longer operate in the country, such as the Benedictines.

UZZNO had reported some successful cases of restitution and had only a few pending cases that required resolution. These include cases in which property had been restituted to UZZNO but not in usable condition, cases in which the property still was occupied by previous tenants, and lands upon which buildings had been constructed after the seizure of the property. UZZNO was also disappointed that a number of municipalities had not respected a valid restitution law that returns property previously owned by Jewish community members. One example was the current dispute over a large house "claimed, but not yet restituted," to the Jewish community, but sold instead to the current tenants of the house (including a member of the Bratislava city council). The suit regarding the property was ongoing, and both parties had received court rulings they claimed gave them ownership of the property.

In 2004, the Bratislava City Government proposed to evict the state-run Jewish Museum from its current location unless it would pay a higher, market-rate rent rather than the nominal rate that it was paying. The museum responded that it did not have the funds to pay the higher rent. Jewish community leaders suggested that the city owes some consideration to them since it owns many other buildings that once belonged to Jewish Holocaust victims. While this building was not among them, it was occupied by many who also perished in the concentration camps. At the end of the period covered by this report, there had been no new developments.

Following two years of negotiations, the Deputy Prime Minister's office drafted a proposal of compensation for heirless property owned by Jewish families before the Holocaust. In 2002, the Cabinet agreed to \$18,747,253 (SKK 850 million) in compensation for this property. The entire amount was placed into an account at the Slovak National Bank, and one-third was made available immediately as needed due to the advancing age of Holocaust survivors. The Jewish community would draw interest on the account for 10 years before receiving the remaining principal. The community intended to use the funds to compensate some community members as well as to fund social, educational, and cultural programs.

UZZNO has filed a lawsuit against Germany to reclaim compensation for monies paid by the wartime Slovak government to Germany to cover the cost of Germany's deportation of 57,000 members of Slovakia's Jewish population. UZZNO lost the lawsuit in 2003 and immediately appealed. Should the German courts refuse the appeal, Jewish leaders plan to take the case to the European Court of Human Rights.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. Few communication problems existed among the major faiths, and there were several ecumenical organizations that fostered closer relationships. The Ecumenical Council of Churches operated and represented several religions.

Anti-Semitism persists among some elements of society, manifested occasionally in incidences of violence and vandalism. According to estimates, 500 to 800 neo-Nazis and 3,000 to 5,000 sympathizers operate in the country and commit serious offenses; however, only a small number of these abuses are prosecuted. The Penal Code stipulates that anyone who publicly demonstrates sympathy towards fascism or movements oppressing human rights and freedoms can be sentenced to jail for up to three years. Police recently broke up a skinhead concert in the eastern part of the country. Legislation is similar to that of neighboring countries, but court delays have prevented comparable improvements in the situation. Religious minorities have not

yet had to avail themselves of protections provided by a new anti-discrimination law passed in 2004.

The low number of prosecutions for racially motivated crime generally improved over the past two years because of the creation of a specialized police unit, an advisor in the Bratislava Regional Police, and increased training. Their successes included the arrest of 24 skinheads, including a major neo-Nazi organizer, at a large meeting in 2003. In another 2004 success, the Bratislava Police checked 158 suspected meeting places of extremist groups in an overnight raid, which resulted in 14 arrests. Because of this monitoring unit and its NGO advisory board, the police were better trained in identifying neo-Nazi members and more informed about their activities. Interior Minister Vladimir Palko had an advisor on racially motivated crime who participated actively on the Government's advisory commission with NGOs. The Ministry of Interior has assigned specialists on hate crimes to each of the country's eight regions.

Some organizations, such as the official cultural organization Matica Slovenska and the Slovak National Party, continue to seek the rehabilitation of former leaders of the Nazi-collaborationist state under Josef Tiso. Meetings and demonstrations to commemorate the anniversary of the first Slovak state from World War II occur each year throughout the country. At these and other events, extremists frequently appear in the uniforms of the Hlinka guards, who identified and sent Jewish people to the concentration camps during World War II. In March 2005, 200 people dressed in Hlinka guard uniforms marched through Bratislava to commemorate the anniversary of the establishment of the Fascist Slovak state in 1939. Jewish community groups complained that the government had not done enough to investigate and identify the benefactors of this group.

Despite protests by UZZNO, Matica Slovenska gave Jozef Mikus, a top official in the Tiso regime, an award for the protection of human rights. Former President Schuster also was criticized for awarding the Pribina Cross, 1st Class, to Mikus for his contributions to the country. Jozef Mikus was employed with the Foreign Ministry during the Tiso regime and fled the country after the war to escape imprisonment.

A Jewish cemetery was desecrated during the period covered by this report. It was likely desecrated between December 2004 and January 2005, although the precise date is unknown. Nine tombstones were overturned but not seriously damaged. Police were able to identify the two juvenile perpetrators, who remained under investigation at the time of this report. An UZZNO official claimed that the case appeared to be one of simple vandalism, but racial motivation could not be ruled out. Vandals regularly spray-paint anti-Semitic slogans and topple or break gravestones. In most cases, police have caught adolescent perpetrators, who are sentenced to pay at least part of the cost of the repairs. Jewish community leaders stated they were satisfied with the Government's response to these incidents, and they did not believe that the communities supported this vandalism. In one notable sentencing that occurred during the period covered by this report, a judge sentenced vandals to unconditional jail sentences, which the Jewish community felt sent a needed message to the community.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Embassy maintained contacts with a broad spectrum of religious groups. The Embassy encouraged tolerance for minority religions. Embassy officers and official visitors met with officials of major and minor religious groups on a regular basis to discuss property restitution issues as well as human rights conditions.

The Embassy continued its dialogue with the Conference of Bishops, the Federation of Jewish Communities, and the Orthodox Church. The Embassy has good relations with the Ministry of Culture and fostered an effective dialogue between religious groups, the Ministry of Culture, and the Commission for the Preservation of U.S. Heritage Abroad on matters of importance to the commission.

Embassy officers played an active role assisting in restitution cases involving U.S. citizens and aided the Government in its attempts to become a member of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research and to initiate a liaison project on Holocaust education in cooperation with the task force. Embassy officers continued to be active in perpetuating this successful project.

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